

INFO	LOG-00	AID-00	AMAD-00	CA-00	CIAE-00	INL-00	DODE-00
	PDI-00	DS-00	EUR-00	UTED-00	VCI-00	H-00	TEDE-00
	INR-00	IO-00	MOFM-00	MOF-00	VCIE-00	DCP-00	NSAE-00
	OIC-00	OIG-00	NIMA-00	PA-00	GIWI-00	SP-00	IRM-00
	NCTC-00	CRYE-00	FMP-00	BBG-00	R-00	ECA-00	SCRS-00
	DSCC-00	PRM-00	DRL-00	G-00	SAS-00	FA-00	SWCI-00
	/000W						

-----53749E 150153Z /38

R 160334Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY SUVA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1145
AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON
AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
USEU BRUSSELS

UNCLAS SUVA 000130

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV KPAQ FJ KDEM

SUBJECT: DIMINISHING MEDIA FREEDOM IN FIJI

¶11. (SBU) Summary. Media censorship in Fiji is at an all-time high and rising following the abrogation of its constitution on April 10.

Under two decreed Public Emergency Regulations, the interim government (IG) is censoring news, placing military officers in key news rooms, deporting foreign journalists, arresting local journalists, and taking other restrictive actions. End summary.

¶12. (U) On April 10, President Ratu Josefa Iloilovatu Uluivuda publicly abrogated Fiji's constitution. Using the just-promulgated Public Emergency Regulations 2009, which are in place for 30 days and can be renewed, the IG announced in its first decree restricting the media: "The news media are to refrain from publishing and broadcasting any news item that is negative in nature, relating to the assumption of executive authority on 10 April 2009 by His Excellency the President and the subsequent appointment of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers."

¶13. (U) The Regulations give the government blanket powers to censor material. More specifically, the Regulations permit: "Where the Permanent Secretary for Information has reason to believe that any broadcast or publication may give rise to disorder and may thereby cause undue demands to be made upon the Police or the Armed Forces or may result in a breach of the peace, or promote disaffection or public alarm or undermine the Government and the State of Fiji, he or she may by order prohibit such broadcast or publication."

¶14. (SBU) The IG is actively enforcing these regulations, vetting nearly every single story, and prohibiting all stories with negative political implications. A police officer and Ministry of Information official are stationed at every major newsroom to monitor publications and broadcasts. Most restrictions have been placed on the heavyweights, which include the Fiji Times newspaper, Fiji TV, Fiji Sun newspaper, and Communications Fiji Limited radio stations. On April 12, media outlets responded by categorically stating in their publications that their content was being censored. Fiji TV stated on the air April 11 that its news was being censored and did not run its nightly news bulletin at all on April 12. The Fiji Times, the most prominent and respected local newspaper, intentionally left a page mostly blank to prove the point.

¶15. (SBU) This approach by the Fiji media irked the IG, particularly Permanent Secretary for Information Major Neumi Leweni. Leweni subsequently ordered all media not to mention censorship and warned the Fiji Times not to leave blank spaces in its editions or risk being shut down. A Leweni-created ultimatum reportedly gives media outlets up to "four strikes." After the fourth repetition of negative reporting on the IG, his ministry will close offending media outlets. One radio news reporter fearfully told us that his company is on its second strike already.

¶16. (U) Most media outlets have chosen to ban all political coverage. This includes all coverage, pro-IG, anti-IG, or neutral. Under the heading "WE BAN POLITICS," the Fiji Sun newspaper in a

front-page article stated: "The Fiji Sun won't publish political reports - either from the interim Government or their critics - until it can do so with accuracy, balance and fairness." Publisher and CEO Peter Lomas cited the Fiji Media Council Code of Ethics requirements to support his declaration, noting that the Code requires journalists to "disclose all known relevant facts and...be balanced and fair in their treatment of news and current affairs."

¶17. (SBU) Examples of actions taken by the IG include:

- Forbidding reporting critical to the IG or the president (all media);
- Forbidding coverage and interviews of IG critics, including anti-abrogation statements from the United States, UN, Commonwealth and other governments;
- Forbidding coverage of mundane negative news stories like "water shortage at the Sigatoka Hospital," reasoning that the originators of complaints should direct their complaints to the Water Department and not the media;
- Forbidding international coverage of protestors in Thailand disrupting the summit of Asian leaders in Bangkok, alleging that "it might give our people ideas";
- Deporting foreign journalists, including Sean Dorney from ABC Australia Network and Sia Aston and Camera Operator Matt Smith of TV 3 New Zealand, for "sending out negative stories about Fiji";
- Ordering Fiji TV not to transmit any footage to overseas television networks;
- Arresting Fiji TV reporter Edwin Nand for interviewing the departing Australian reporter Sean Dorney. Nand remains in police custody as of midday Tuesday; and
- Arresting but later releasing two Fiji media cameramen and a reporter.

¶18. (SBU) The Fiji Times also pulled its social networking website, SotiaCentral. However, despite rumors such a move was imminent, the IG has not shut down local blogs, which remain very active. The April 15 Fiji Times shows an editorial cartoon of a person scratching his head saying "I wonder why that is?" while looking at a bar graph showing a dramatic spike in internet usage in April. (This one must have slipped by the censors.) People are clearly turning to blogs for the latest rumors, updates and information. Blogs vary in quality, are emotional (primarily angry), but often contain relevant and timely political information.

¶19. (SBU) Comment: These are tough times for the media in Fiji. Angst is growing among journalists. Things are likely to get worse before they get better and may include either the closure of offending media outlets with "four strikes," or the expulsion of expatriate staff on longer-term work permits. Journalists being journalists will undoubtedly find ways to circumvent the censorship.

The April 15 edition of the Daily Post included "news" of someone having breakfast (headline: Breakfast as Usual), another person catching a bus (headline: Man Gets on Bus), and a third watching the paint dry on his couch (headline: Paint Dry). The Post reported all matter-of-factly with no hint of satire, but a read of any brings an understanding smile to all.

PRUETT